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ABSTRACT

Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, developed a course in practical writing skills for bilingual students as a means of reducing the dropout rate among vocational students, the largest group of Hispanic students in the institution. The objective was to provide writing skills through source materials with a practical orientation. Most of the 50 original participants were unable to register in or complete a college level course because of limited writing skills in either Spanish or English and inadequate general knowledge. The method's main features are that the student: (1) reads and analyzes, orally and in writing, current periodicals in both Spanish and English; (2) meets with other Hispanics in successful careers; and (3) has a bilingual Hispanic tutor. The course is designed to give adult students a feeling of accomplishment by using their own language and experience while learning to organize and express their ideas on paper, and it is recommended that it be taken in conjunction with English as a second language and reading for even more positive results. Foreign language teachers are in the best position to provide this practical transitional experience. (MSE)

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TEACHING PRACTICAL WRITING SKILLS TO HISPANIC STUDENTS

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TEACHING PRACTICAL WRITING SKILLS TO HISPANIC STUDENTS

By Professors Emilia Borsi and Fay R. Rogg

Hispanics in increasing numbers are registering in community colleges. They are looking for career programs which will allow them to become economically self sufficient. At C.U.N.Y. they make up 20.9% of all new students. But what has been their record of success? While statistics are not available there is strong evidence to support the belief that Hispanics have less chance of graduating than the general population.

The reasons are many and as varied as is the profile of the Hispanic population. However, limited language skills, more often than not, represent the major obstacle to their academic success.

STUDENT RETENTION

What can the colleges do to retain Hispanic students whose increasing numbers can no longer be ignored?

Our community college, Borough of Manhattan Community College, is fairly typical of community colleges across the country in that there has been a shift from liberal arts to vocational education. Along with this trend an increasing number of Hispanics have been admitted. Additionally, the Hispanic population wishes to retain its own culture and identity while being mainstreamed in America.

But once in college, what are their options? The major portion of those tested are told to register in ESL, reading and remedial mathematics. Colleges today lack the finances to accommodate all the students who need remedial work. As a result, Hispanic students register in courses that they cannot cope with and drop out. Remedial programs such as Title III, College Discovery and Seek have produced no dramatic changes.

Our concern for this situation made us rethink the approach of solving the language problem and the way in which the skills of foreign language teachers fluent in English and Spanish could be used to help bilingual students.

In 1982 we developed a program in Practical Writing Skills for bilingual students funded by Vocational Education Amendments of 1976, New York State Education Department. A previous four year VEA award "Language Skills for Bilingual Vocational Students", helped us to develop a method of teaching Hispanic students how to improve their writing.

Our aim is to improve writing skills through source materials that have a practical orientation. We have taken into account the fact that the majority of Hispanic students choose to go into two-year vocational programs such as office management, data processing, accounting and business management.

Fifty students with profiles similar to the following are selected to participate in the program.

Salvador Acosta, Hispanic, arrived in USA at age 12, speaks English, household Spanish, is placed in remedial English and Mathematics.

Iris Colón, Hispanic, arrived in USA two years ago, fluent in Spanish, minimal English, is placed in English as a Second Language. No content credit bearing courses permitted.

Angel Santiago, American, born in the Bronx of Hispanic parents, raised in the ghetto, product of city public schools, speaks English, street Spanish, has limited communication skills, writing, reading, is placed in remedial everything.

What are the chances for academic success of these students who represent the range of Hispanic students? We try to develop and ultimately channel them into a career of their choice.

These students have in common that they cannot register and/or complete a college level course in whatever curriculum they choose, have limited writing skills in both Spanish and English and are extremely weak in even the most elementary general knowledge.

THE METHOD

The main features of the method are that:

1. The student reads and analyzes both orally and in writing current periodicals in both Spanish and English.

2. The student meets with other Hispanics in successful careers.

3. The student has available a Hispanic tutor.

The distinguishing feature of the method involves a big dose of reading articles in current periodicals such as The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Business Week and Hombre de Mundo, a Spanish periodical on current events. At the beginning, Spanish articles are read out loud to improve comprehension, correct reading of punctuation marks, clarify vocabulary and inform.

The next step is to analyze the parts of the article as a whole and together work out a summary on the blackboard. As the students practice they gain confidence and are able to go home and do summaries of very short Spanish articles, to pinpoint themes and underline main ideas. They average three summaries per week.

Samples of articles from periodicals have included the following subjects: profiles of international entrepreneurs and scientists, Japanese, Mexican and Chinese industrial development and problems, state of the art high technology, etc. The brevity of the articles, the variety of subjects, the immediacy of the information stimulates and motivates the students. At this stage the students are both reading and writing in Spanish on a limited but constructive basis.

These students are also registered in the departments of Developmental Skills (ESL and Reading) and English. Both departments have urged that all other departments help them in their gargantuan task of teaching students basic English reading and writing skills. However, it seems sensible to learn grammatical skills in their first language while transferring the skills to the second language. In this way the students receive a double dose of practice. If students can pick out themes, understand what they read, and organize material in their own language, then they can do it also in English.

The next step is to assign an article to be read and summarized in a 50-55 minute class. The purpose of this activity is to prepare the students for accomplishing successful essay type questions and examinations that they will write in future content courses and to help them work under time pressure as many are not accustomed to meeting deadlines.

At first students find this a formidable task but eventually it becomes routine for the majority of students.

As the semester progresses English articles are introduced using the same approach; that is, students read out loud in class, analyze together then summarize at home and finally write pieces in class which are handed in for evaluations. In this way the students first hone their reading and writing skills in Spanish and then apply those skills to English reading and writing.

A second distinguishing feature of this method which is essential to the success of the course are visits by Hispanic members of the business world who are living proof of realized aspirations. For students who do not come from a milieu where the written word has meaning, this feature is indispensable both as a role model and an effective "second opinion" to the teacher. Hispanic speakers from airlines, insurance companies, television, advertising etc., all reinforce the need for good writing, speedy reading skills to maintain and advance in the job world.

A third distinguishing feature is the use of a Spanish-English tutor who is available to students twenty five hours per week. The tutor corrects assignments with them, either one to one or in small groups and also deals with specific problem areas in writing.

The tutor is a liaison working with both the students and the instructors. The tutor is apprised of course content, methodology, assignments and tests. We chose a Hispanic tutor whom the students would like to emulate, an accomplished individual - fluent in both English and Spanish, a working parent, and a writer with a promising career.

A Spanish writing manual is required reading for the students. It introduces students to the characteristics of the main writing styles; narrative, descriptive, journalistic, etc.

At Borough of Manhattan Community College we have found that this course unlike the traditional Spanish courses offered in foreign language departments, which use a traditional grammatical approach, better meets the needs of Hispanic adults who must learn to write but only have a sixth or seventh grade reading level and are planning a career in the business world.

These students need to harness their knowledge - limited as it may be. They must learn practical writing. They must be prepared to write for their college courses while they are gaining greater command of English in the ESL and Reading courses. This transitional program is comparable to Freshman English Composition where English speaking students learn to strengthen their skills for their college level courses.

In our course, Hispanic students are doing the same thing in Spanish. They then transfer these skills to English.

Therefore, this approach represents one for adults who cannot grasp a new language as quickly as a child and must enter the job market as quickly as possible. The course is designed to give adult students a feeling of accomplishment by using their own language and experience while learning to organize and express their ideas on paper. When the course is taken in conjunction with ESL and Reading it produces even more positive results.

NEED FOR LITERACY

Who is in a better position to serve this population than foreign language teachers?

A recent study "Make Something Happen", sponsored by the Hispanic Policy Development Project, a nonprofit citizens group based in Washington urges hiring more Spanish speaking teachers.[1] Although the study addresses the needs of secondary education the same applies to community college level. In many colleges foreign language teachers are restricted to teaching traditional grammatical courses designed for non-Hispanic Students. The talents of the foreign language teachers are not being used constructively.

[1]Alarcón, Daniel, Hispanic Students' Education Problems Under Examination, Tampa Tribune, Dec. 13, 1984, Page 2B.

Other recent popular references as well as scholarly journals recognize the need to provide relevant, practical, to the point education for Hispanics. For example, the Wall Street Journal, November 30, 1983[1] cited Bilingual Projects in McAllen, Texas and the advantages of immersion of Hispanic students at early levels of schooling as one approach.

An article under Social Issues, in Business Week, April 17, 1984, "How Business is Joining the Fight Against Functional Illiteracy [2] cites that "56% of the Hispanic (17 years old) are rated as functionally illiterate because reading is irrelevant to their out-of-school lives". Business is so concerned that they are setting up volunteer and corporate funded reading courses throughout the country, according to the article.

CONCLUSION

We are advocating that Hispanic students learn English as quickly as possible, but use the resources of Hispanic students and be sensitive to their needs by adopting a practical transitional approach at the college level. Further, use the resources of foreign language teachers already available on campus.

(1) Schorr, Burt "Grade-School Project Helps Hispanic Pupils Learn English Quickly", Wall Street Journal - November 30, 1983, Page 1.

(2) Business Week, "How Business is Joining the Fight Against Functional Illiteracy", Page 96.

Our practical writing skills method or something similar must be included in the college curriculum to correct the attrition rate of Hispanic students to allow them to pursue their studies and to ultimately achieve their career goals.

Educators and their many studies skirt around the bilingual issue because they are afraid to confront the critics who say "Let them learn English the way our grandparents did". A solid background in their first language was how our grandparents learned a second language.